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BACKGROUND

Rules for Using the Term "Healthy" on Meat and Poultry Labels

On May 10, 1994, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the Department of Health and Human Services jointly published new regulations for use of the term "*healthy*" on food labels. Under the rules, the definition for the term "*healthy*" requires that foods labeled "*healthy*" must fit into a diet that meets the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* for fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium.

Consumers expect that foods labeled "*healthy*" contain essential nutrients, according to a recent survey by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The survey showed that 63 percent of respondents expect that a product labeled "*healthy*" to be a good source of some important vitamins and minerals. That is why the FSIS and FDA regulations also require that food products labeled "*healthy*" "*healthful*," "*healthier*," or similar terms have to contain at least 10 percent of the Daily Value of such nutrients as vitamin A or C, iron, calcium, protein or fiber.

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act passed by Congress in 1990 requires nutrition labeling (a "Nutrition Facts" panel) on processed foods under the jurisdiction of the FDA as of May 8, 1994. To provide consistent information on all types of processed foods even though the law did not apply to meat and poultry products, FSIS published final regulations on January 6, 1993. The FSIS rules require Nutrition Facts on all processed meat and poultry products as of July 6, 1994.

Rulemaking Process

Both FSIS and FDA published separate proposals for use of the term "*healthy*," on January 6, 1993. The 97 comments in response to those proposals reflected many different opinions. As the result of consideration of the comments and cooperative effort between the two agencies, the final rules have one definition for how the words "*healthy*," "*healthful*," "*healthier*," and similar terms can be used when manufacturers want to use the terms to characterize their products.

Compliance Effective Dates

In accordance with the 1990 law, to be labeled “*healthy*,” foods regulated by FDA must meet the new requirements by May 8, 1994. The new definition for “*healthy*” for meat and poultry products, regulated by FSIS, becomes effective November 10, 1995, even if the products have been so labeled in the past. The rule applies to brand names as well as to prominent displays on other parts of the label.

The requirements for each type of product are spelled out in the chart on page 3 and in the text below.

Essential Nutrients

In general, processed meat and poultry products labeled “*healthy*” have to contain 10 percent or more of the Daily Value of one to three (depending on the type of product and its package size) of the following essential nutrients: vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, protein, or fiber.

Sodium

Noting that on the average Americans consume more sodium (including table salt, which is sodium chloride) than is considered optimal under the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the FSIS and FDA rules on products labeled “*healthy*” set limits for sodium. FSIS phased in the sodium limits for meat and poultry products to ensure that products continue to meet consumer expectations, to minimize costs of complying with the new rule, and to give manufacturers sufficient time to reformulate products. If the products do not qualify as “*healthy*” under the new definitions, manufacturers may use appropriate alternatives such as “*light*” or “*reduced*.”

Individual Meat and Poultry Products

Under the FSIS rule, individual meat or poultry products (like turkey soup, beef burritos, or pork chow mein) labeled “*healthy*” must contain 10 percent or more of at least one of the essential nutrients per serving. The product can contain no more than 60 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per serving, and it must meet the FSIS definition for “*low fat*” (3 grams (g) per serving) and “*low saturated fat*” (1 g per serving). In addition, the product must comply with sodium limits. That is, within 18 months after the rule published (by Nov. 10, 1995) burritos, for instance, can contain no more than 480 mg of sodium per serving. On November 10, 1997, the maximum sodium level for such products drops to 360 mg.

Meal-type Meat and Poultry Products

When meat or poultry is the main dish in a meal-type product (like a packaged dinner of sirloin tips of beef, noodles and carrots) to be called “*healthy*,” the meal must contain at least two or three of the required nutrients, depending on the size of the package. Meals weighing between 6 and 10 ounces (oz) must meet the level for two of the nutrients, and those weighing 10 oz or more must meet the levels for three of the nutrients per serving.

For “*healthy*” meals, a serving can have no more than 90 mg of cholesterol. For total fat, the limit is 3 g per 100 grams of food and for saturated fat the limit is 1 g per 100 g of food. In addition, meat or poultry prepared meals can contain no more than 600 mg of sodium per serving after November 10, 1995; and after November 10, 1997, the limit will be 480 mg per serving.

REQUIREMENTS FOR USE OF THE TERM "HEALTHY" ON MEAT AND POULTRY PRODUCT LABELS

(Effective November 10, 1995)

TYPE OF PRODUCT	ESSENTIAL NUTRIENTS*	CHOLESTEROL	FAT	SATURATED FAT	SODIUM***
Individual Meat & Poultry Products (e.g., beef burritos, turkey soup or pork chow mein)	10 percent or more of at least one of the essential nutrients	No more than 60mg per serving**	Meet USDA's "low fat" definition, 3g per serving	Meet USDA's "low saturated fat" definition, 1g per serving	Nov. 1995 480mg per serving Nov. 1997 360mg per serving
Meal-Type Products (e.g., frozen meal, beef sirloin tips, carrots, and noodles) 6-10 oz package)	10 percent or more of at least two of the nutrients per serving	90mg per serving	3g per serving	1g per serving	Nov. 1995 600mg per serving Nov. 1997 480 per serving
Meal-Type Products (packages of 10oz or more)	10 percent or more of at least three of the nutrients per serving	90mg per serving	3g per serving	1g per serving	Nov. 1995 600mg per serving Nov. 1997 480mg per serving
Raw Meat & Poultry Products (e.g., skinless chicken breast, beef round steak or tenderloin pork chops)	10 percent or more of at least one of the essential nutrients	95mg per serving and per 100g of product	5g per serving and per 100g of product	2g per serving and per 100g of product	Not Applicable

* The product must contain 10 percent or more of the Daily Value of from one to three essential nutrients: vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein, or fiber.

** Serving sizes must be expressed in common household terms and must be the size typically consumed

*** Sodium limits are being phased in, effective Nov. 10, 1995 and Nov. 10, 1997

Single Ingredient Raw Meat and Poultry Products

For single ingredient raw meat and poultry products (like skinless chicken breasts, beef round steak, or tenderloin pork chops) FSIS issued requirements that are similar to FDA's rules for seafood and game meats. The rule permits the term "*healthy*" on single ingredient raw products if they contain 10 percent or more of at least one of the essential ingredients per serving. The raw products also must meet the FSIS definition for "*Extra Lean*" — that is, no more cholesterol than 95 mg per serving and per 100 grams of product, no more than 5 g fat per serving and per 100 g of product, and no more than 2 g of saturated fat per serving and per 100 g of product.

Consumers have the right to expect nutrition information on meat and poultry labels to be the same as that provided on other types of food. For this reason, the FSIS and FDA staffs worked together to issue parallel rules for virtually all processed foods.

The federal agencies issued nutrition information rules and defined "*healthy*" in the regulations because consumers have the right to know that foods labeled "*healthy*" do, indeed, meet dietary guidelines and contain essential nutrients. Having accurate information on all types of processed foods makes it easier for consumers to select a nutritious diet from the wide variety of foods available in the American marketplace.

For more information on nutrition and on safe food handling, call (TDD and voice): The FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-800-535-4555; in the Washington, D.C., area, call, 202-720-3333.

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